Syrup for the Tapping

By Mark McIntyre and Chris Collop

As we were driving down behind the dam of Forest Lake on an old shale road, we looked off toward the old Charlton River. We saw several hundred trees with one-gallon milk jugs hanging on them.

We drove on down the road about another quarter of a mile and saw a contraption that had the appearance of a still. For a moment we thought we were back in the times of Prohibition. We could imagine what people would think when they saw it. They would probably wonder who the crazy man was that would put a still right along a public road. Well, the man isn’t crazy nor is the contraption a still. It’s just Etzel Sanders’ cooker-evaporator, which he uses for his maple syrup operation.

Etzel has been making maple syrup most of his life. When he was a boy, his mother would say, “Etzel, you better get out there and tap the trees; the sap’s running!” He would use a hollowed-out elderberry twig for the tube, allowing the sap to flow into a bucket. To evaporate his sap he would put it in a metal bucket on the family’s wood-burning cook stove.

Etzel has considerably improved and modernized his operation since he was a boy. Today he uses an empty 12-gauge shotgun shell for the tube and he uses a water tank from an old steam engine for the evaporator.

Etzel says selecting the tree is the easiest part of making maple syrup. Any species of maple will do; however, some work better than others. Neither the age nor the size of the tree makes any difference. The tapping process does not harm the tree, either.

To tap the tree, Etzel drills a ½” hole into the tree about chest high, four inches back. As many as four or five holes may be bored into the tree depending upon its size. An empty 12-gauge shotgun shell (with the metal end cut off) serves as the tube for the sap to flow through. Etzel hammers the tube into the hole until about an inch is left outside the tree.

To catch the sap, Etzel cuts out a gallon milk jug, as shown in the photograph, and then nails it to the tree.

The sap looks and tastes like water. It usually begins to flow during late February and continues through March. The sap is colorless and it is only during the cooking process that it begins to change and take on the rich brown color associated with maple syrup.

When the jug is full, Etzel unscrews the cap on the jug, which allows the sap to fall into a bucket. He then covers the bucket with a lid and loads it into his truck to haul to the cooker-evaporator.

The sap usually contains from two to three percent sugar but can contain as much as 10 percent sugar depending upon the quality of the tree. The cooking process evaporates the water and miraculously changes the color of the sap. The reason for the color change is that there is less water in the sap to hide its color.

Before pouring the sap into the pan, a clean cloth is stretched across the top of the bucket to keep any debris out of the syrup. Cooking the sap is the most tedious part of making maple syrup; however, it does allow one to catch up on all the gossip.

The stove part of the cooker was made from the water tank on an old steam engine. It has been lined with firebricks.

A hot fire is built in the stove so that the sap will come to a boil. The top of the stove has been cut away so that the bottom of the pan is in direct contact with the flames.

The pan is constructed of a stainless steel bottom with two by eights for the sides. It has the appearance of a john boat. The reason for the stainless steel bottom is to keep the fire from burning through and the syrup from sticking. Also the stainless steel is very clean.

The sap is cooked for about a day to reach syrup consistency. If it is desired, it can be cooked longer to reach the sugar stage. But remember, the longer the sap is cooked, the less sap produced. Approximately 120 gallons of sap equals six gallons of syrup.

After the sap has been cooked, it must be sealed in jars or frozen to prevent spoilage.

When Etzel got all of the maple syrup he wanted, he asked Clifford Scrivens if he wanted to make some. Clifford agreed and he is pictured in some of the photos on these pages.

Many people don’t realize that if they have a maple tree in their yard, they are sitting on a gold mine of sweets that cost nothing. Or even if they don’t make very much, they have the satisfaction of saying to their neighbors, “I made this maple syrup myself!”

Etzel Sanders doesn’t buy his maple syrup at grocery stores; instead he manufactures it himself. His companion in this photo is his mule Jake.
In top left photo, Etzel takes a break after tearing down an old house for fuel for the cooker. Top right is Etzel’s maple tree patch, owned by Marvin Mears. The two center photos show the tap and collector, and Etzel with his cooker-evaporator. Bottom left, Clifford Scrivens pours the sap, using a cloth over the bucket for a strainer. Below right, Clifford prepares the fire for another batch of syrup.